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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how a language teacher educator guides her students through a particular literacy research project, with the goal of helping students to enjoy their research experience. It outlines two stages to make up the entire assignment--the interview and the paper. It describes the development of questions for the purpose of gaining more awareness of the writing and reading processes. It concludes that the action research approach created a context for students to investigate a problem, ask higher order questions, gather data, draw conclusions, and present findings. It includes a list of six final suggestions. Appendixes contain details of assignments on "Writing-on-Writing," and present results of groupwork on collected class data. (SC)

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DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

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Designing an Effective Action Research Project

in the Language Arts Classroom

When I ask the question, *Does research have to be boring?*, my resounding reply is – No way! Recently, I discovered how an effective action research project –placed in the hands of my students-- could be both exciting and meaningful in solving the pedagogical problem of teaching reading and writing strategies. I came upon this idea from Cambourne's early work as a precursor to *Reading Recovery* which essentially addresses in emergent readers the question, "How do good readers *read*?" Thus, my assignments developed out of the need for my Secondary Education Methods students, enrolled in "Reading and Writing Across-the-Curriculum," to accelerate their knowledge about literacy by asking similar, essential questions. Furthermore, this same assignment has been extended to the Secondary English classroom with similar successes. Whether this project may be used in the university or secondary classroom, two conceptual constructs form the framework – action research and Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development."

Since the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940's, action research has gained a foothold in education largely through the link between research and practice. As applied to this study, action research has come to involve investigating a topic for the purposes of solving problems (Corey; Stenhouse; McFarland and Stansell). Although action research has had resurgence in the literature (Hubbard and Power) as scientific inquiry applied to solving classroom problems, I maintain that action research may be conducted mutually by both the teacher and the students.

Additionally, this project gave students the opportunity to conduct interviews and to learn much from one who has more expertise. In Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development," the learner has two levels: a level of actual development and a level of

potential development. Potential development is guided by the assistance of one who has expertise. Therefore, the interview provided a context for the student to be placed with successful readers and writers.

The study began with my own frantic question, "How was I, as a teacher educator, going to give my students a meaningful slice-of-life experience in the process of writing and reading so that they will reinforce literacy in their own future classrooms?" It had occurred to me that before I could start any literacy discussions, students first needed to conduct their own investigations to generate, reflect, and share data that addressed the fundamental questions: *What is a good writer? What is a good reader?* The success of this project was overwhelming, and the secret to the success was in the design

My first order of business was to narrow down the purpose of the assignment -- to accelerate students' understanding of literacy. Other purposes took shape: 1. To investigate literacy as a community of learners, 2. To discover the broad spectrum of reading / writing approaches, 3. To examine reading / writing for different purposes, and 4. To examine the stages of the reading / writing processes. Although the original project had been adapted from Elbow & Belanoff, this model had been designed to take students through the steps of generating, reflecting, and sharing data from authentic sources -- real readers and writers.

The Writing Question

Students chose someone who writes a significant amount and perceives of himself or herself as a writer. Students were required to address the following categories during their interviews: 1. Kinds / variety of writing the person produces, 2. Conditions that must be present when the person writes, 3. Description of the stages of the writing process, and 4. Something they learned about writing from the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. We practiced some of our questioning techniques in class with a guest speaker before students began their own interviews.

Two stages made up the entire assignment -- the interview and the paper. To prepare and orchestrate the interview, the students completed the following steps during the first stage of this project:

1. Read and discussed requirements of project (see appendix for assignment) as a class, including the grading criteria.
2. Read a variety of models of interviews and final papers.
3. Created a list of 20 questions in class based on the above criteria.
4. Discussed possibilities of subjects to interview.
5. Practiced mock interviews in class with invited writers.
6. Watched a video, entitled "How I Write" with Nancy Gibbs of *Time Magazine*.
7. Conducted 45 minute interviews with chosen writer.
8. Brought individual data to class to compile into group data.
9. Folded group data into class data to be presented.

After the preliminary steps were taken, students interviewed someone who perceives of himself or herself as a good writer. I never defined good writer and preferred to let students construct their own definitions at a later date. Students then organized their data from the interview to be shared in groups. Each group consisting of four members tackled three questions: 1. Who did you interview? 2. What did you learn in each category? And, 3.) What did you learn about writing collectively as a group?

Students then engaged in group discussions for about 30 minutes and compiled their data on an overhead transparency to be shared with the class. Group data then was collected at the end of class and compiled into class data by the instructor. All students received a copy of the class data the next day. Only then did the more meaningful discussions begin, particularly the comparison of our findings to the body of literature that already exists in the field.

The second stage of the project involved the formal paper. During the writing of the paper, the class concentrated on the stages of process writing. Students were asked to: 1.

Write rough drafts of the interview paper, 2. Share rough drafts with their newly formed Writing Support Group, 3. Polish paper to be collected, 4. Revise paper for better grade if needed, and 5. Compile papers for class publication. Most students who did not look forward to the lengthy assignment reported that they were excited by the results.

The Reading Question

Essentially, the reading assignment went the same way without the formal paper. The goal was for students to learn about the great diversity of reading so they would have more options when they read and to gain more awareness of the reading process. Other goals were to: 1. Examine the processes involved in reading different texts, 2. Learn about the broad spectrum of reading approaches/strategies, 3. Focus on the stages of reading, and 4. Examine how reading begins.

With this project, students still interviewed a "good reader." Interviews were to include:

1. The kind of reading the person does.
2. The conditions that must be present when a person reads.
3. The processes used when the person reads.
4. The incidents that have been helpful or harmful in reading.
5. Something the student concludes.

Next, students organized their data into the required categories, shared their data in groups, and presented group data to the class. After the instructor compiled the class data, the class compared their findings to well-known experts in the field such as Marie Clay, Brian Cambourne, Don Holdaway, Frank Smith, Jerome Harste, Marie Carbo, Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, and David Pearson. We then learned about reading strategies that may be used in the classroom to promote active reading

Conclusions

As the instructor, the excitement derived from the class data. Students learned more by bringing what they learned about reading / writing to class, sharing what they learned, and

compiling what they learned by comparing their findings with the existing literature. We later compared the parallels between the reading and writing process (Butler and Turbill).

This action research approach created a context for students to investigate a problem, ask higher order questions, gather data, draw conclusions, and present findings. Such action research allows both the teacher and the students to take an active role in their own learning and to compare their findings to other researchers in the field.

Although action research involves investigating a topic for the purposes of solving problems, it can take many forms as the class learns to gather data through interviews, surveys, questionnaires, oral histories, and observations. Students learn to present their findings through the traditional model of asking questions, gathering data, tabulating results, drawing conclusions, and presenting findings.

Some final suggestions come from Carol Holder of Cal Poly-Pomona, who discusses project designs for the classroom:

1. Construct projects in relation to course objectives.
2. Create a context for the project.
3. Clarify the project through steps or stages.
4. Have students collaborate at some stages.
5. Specify the criteria you will use to evaluate the assignment.
6. Provide models of the type of results you will expect.

This action research project was successful giving students a meaningful slice-of-experience in reading and writing. Kemmis and McTaggart . wrote that action research involves the trying out of ideas in the classroom as a means of improvement and knowledge about the curriculum, pedagogy, and learning. From the perspective of both instructor and students, such a project provides an opportunity to change and improve classroom practices.

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Appendix I: Assignment on Writing-on-Writing

You will be asked to conduct and write up some notes on an interview with someone about how they write. My goal is for you to learn about the great diversity of ways of writing in the world so you will see more options when you write. As we share our interviews with classmates, you will get much more perspective and awareness about the writing process. Other goals will be:

-to examine the processes involved in writing for different purposes.

-to learn about the broad spectrum of writing approaches/strategies

-to focus on the stages of writing - what comes first, second, third . .

-to examine what is an emergent writer or how writing begins.

Your main objective then is to write up an interview with someone about his/her writing. This interview should last at least 45 minutes, and you should take excellent notes to pass in. Choose someone who does a significant amount of writing and who takes writing seriously. Make sure your interview includes:

1. The kind of writing the person does.
2. The conditions that must be present when a person writes.
3. The ways/processes in which the person writes.
4. The incidents that have been helpful or harmful in writing.
5. Any changes in writing that the person has experienced.
6. Something you conclude. That is, don't just give a portrait of your writer; make your interview an occasion for explaining a conclusion you have reached about writing on the basis of the interview. Perhaps it may be a conclusion about why the person writes well or about the nature of writing. Perhaps it will be something you conclude about your writing on the basis of interviewing the person. Figure out something that is interesting to you, and it will probably be interesting to others.

The Writer

Pick someone who writes a significant amount and cares about writing, such as:

- An adult professional who is devoted to writing as a large part of his/her job.
- And adult who is devoted to writing thought it is not part of his/her job.
- A junior, senior, or graduate student who is a proficient writer.

Helpful Questions

- Kinds - Would you tell me all the kinds of writing that you do?
- Conditions - Tell me something about where and when you usually write and under what conditions promote writing. Do you think that any of this makes a difference in your writing?
- Processes - Try and determine the writing processes for several kinds of writing. What happens before, during, and after writing.
- Incidents - What past experiences have been helpful and harmful to how this person writes. What helped him/her the most in learning? What was the role of learning by instruction versus experience?
- Changes - What important changes have there been in how s/he writes and feels about writing?

Requirements - You will want the following categories on a blank sheet of paper before you conduct your interview: Kinds, Conditions, Processes, Incidents, Change, and Conclusions. Notes must be legible for me to read.

Adapted from Elbow & Belanoff. *A Community of Writers*. NY: Random., 1995

Appendix II: Results of Groupwork on Collected Class Data

General Statements about Writing

Any one can become a writer.

One does not have to be a born a writer.

Writing can apply to all content areas.

Writers use writing to explore new things.

Writing can change your opinions

Logical thinking produces better writers.

Writing is a complex activity.

Writing takes a lot of time and patience.

Writing takes dedication and hard work.

Writing can be habit forming.

Avid writers go loco if they do not write.

Writing can be enjoyable.

When a person likes to write, it doesn't matter what they write.

Some writers write to please themselves; others do not.

Writers can be inspired by the work of other writers.

Writing provides an avenue for different perspectives.

Everyone has a different "voice" in writing.

Writers may have many different inspirations (religious, experience, other writers)

Many people do not consider themselves writers even when they write every day.

Writing can be combined well with other careers (motherhood).

The importance of writing goes far beyond a job or skill.

Kinds of Writing

Many things constitute writing -- grocery lists, notes, letters, musical notes . . .

One person can write many different styles (poems, music, reports)

Audience and purpose determine approach.

Conditions of Writing

Different people have different conditions under which they write.

Physical surroundings are crucial to enhance writer, i.e. - light and sound.

Changes in Writing

What to write and writing interest varies through the years.

Writing is developmental and grows with time.

Tough Spots in Writing

All writers experience writer's block and periods of being stuck.

Writers have to motivate themselves.

Fear of writing is important to overcome.

It is difficult to find original thoughts.

Publishers are difficult to please.

The first paragraph is most difficult.

Many writers do not like to be critiqued.

Writing can be lonely.

The Process of Writing

Writing is a process.

One who does a lot of writing may not always use the same process.

Process varies according to purpose and audience.

For each type of writing requires a different process.

Everyone has a different process depending on purpose of writing.

Writers need time for ideas to grow.

Prewriting is just as important as the polishing stages.

Writing is making a mess and cleaning it up.

Practice makes perfect. Write a lot of drafts.

The more you write, the better you become.

Writing improves with practice.

Writers are always rewriting.

Writing is often done in more than one sitting.

Even good writers can benefit from group feedback.

Depending on the type of writing will depend on whether feedback is warranted.

Some writers don't like to revise words.

Group editing helps in the polishing stages.

Constructive criticism and positive reinforcement from others may be valuable.

Group editing leads to more individual confidence and more interest in writing.

Writing is never ending.

Some fundamentals of writing are not formally taught.

Advice for Good Writers

Writers find it easier to write about what they know.

Write about what interests you.

Motivation enhances writing.

A good writer wants to engage all readers.

Writers need to read a lot.

Background knowledge is vital before writing.

Importance of knowing your audience is crucial for good writing.

Writers write for different purposes.

Everyone writes for one purpose or another.

Writing styles vary according to audience.

It is important to organize notes and formulate good questions.

Organization is the key to being a good writer.

Many writers do not start with an outline.

Writing involves constant reorganization.

Introduction is important because it attracts the attention of reader.

Writing improves when you economize words.

Writing with the computer helps with all of the stages of writing.

Research can be done through Internet.

Lots of peer feedback helps writers.

Creativity is a key element in the recipe.

Descriptive writing engages the reader.

Reading aloud helps the writer find his/her errors

One can learn a lot,about writing by seeing how others develop thoughts.

Word choice is important to create a tone for the reader.

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between a fire and a firefly."

Collective Threads on Writing

Everyone can be a writer.

Physical surroundings affect writers.

Writers need to gain or tap prior knowledge.

Writers like to write about things that interest them.

Writers write for different reasons (therapy, reflections, business, research)

Each person writes in their own way (processes) & for their own purposes.

Time spent on writing differs significantly.

Writing process is a working process -- non-linear.

Everyone starts the writing process very differently.

Most writers prefer composing on a computer.

Writers spice-up writing with personal experiences.

Getting feedback from others is important for writers.

Research is essential for good writing.

Brainstorming & journaling can help writers get started.

Organization is the backbone of writing.

Revisions, revisions, revisions.

Writing can be therapeutic & compulsive.

Writing styles and interests change.

Writing is easier to see as a process than reading.

People who like to write also like to read.